



CoPAFS: A Co-PARENTING TOOL FOR ASSESSING AND CLINICAL INTERVENING

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Coparenting is a concept defined as two or more adults in any family structure engaging in the shared activities and responsibilities of raising a child (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). The coparenting subsystem of the family is distinct from the marital relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the family system as a whole (Kerig, 2019; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Through many studies, including meta-analyses, we have come to appreciate its power for promoting children's and families' well-being. Researchers have repeatedly found coparenting to be a predictor of parenting quality and family stability (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2016; 2022) across family structures (e.g., living together and separated), including sexually and gender-diverse families (Farr et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2016). Through dedicated coparenting, even parents in conflict can nevertheless parent their child(ren) competently and effectively (Pruett et al., 2017; 2019).

One of its superpowers is that positive coparenting optimizes parenting: positive coparenting is associated with better mother-child and father-child relationships in both middle-class and low-income families (Doss et al., 2014; Feinberg et al., 2016). In married couples, lower marital satisfaction is related to poorer coparenting (Christopher et al., 2015), while coparenting quality may be associated with parenting quality even more closely than marital satisfaction (Feinberg et al., 2010). Coparenting predicts parenting quality, especially for mothers (Le et al., 2016), and positive father involvement, especially among fathers (Pruett et al., 2017; Pruett & Pruett, 2020). Moreover, healthier coparenting is related to better child outcomes in heterosexual and same-sex families (Farr et al., 2019; McConnell & Kerig, 2002; Neppl et al., 2019; Stright & Neitzel, 2003). Supportive coparenting can directly serve as a buffer against the transmission of negative effects to children from depressed and anxious parents (Feinberg et al., 2016).

Components of Coparenting

With all of this research supporting the importance of coparenting, there is still much to be learned about the construct in order to harness its positive effects for the benefit of families.

Significant heterogeneity exists across studies of the various constructs of coparenting, although although most studies have identified two high-order dimensions, conflict and support, and several lower-order dimensions, including triangulation (parent-child coalitions that undermine the other parent and blur parent-child boundaries; Margolin et al., 2001); coparenting alliance (Hock & Mooradian, 2012; 2013; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004); childrearing agreement; division of labor in childrearing; support and undermining actions between co-parents; and joint family management of interactions (Feinberg, 2003; McHale & Irace, 2011).

In separated families, developing cooperative coparenting is considered an optimal goal to facilitate post-divorce/separation parenting and child adjustment. For these couples, conflict is the central theme in a number of conceptually overlapping instruments. Other primary indices in these various measures include communication, hostility, triangulation, cooperation, respect for the other parent, gatekeeping, support, and cohesion (see Saini et al., 2019; Saini et al., 2022 for summaries). Boundary ambiguity (Beckmeyer et al., 2021; Pruett & Donsky, 2011) and a drop off in coparenting support (Malette et al., 2020) also are identified in separated families.

Assessing Coparenting

While there are measures with adequate psychometric properties available for assessing both intact and separated coparenting (Feinberg et al., 2012; McHale et al., 2008; Teubert & Pinquart, 2011), there are no validated measures reliably capable of capturing the salient dimensions of the construct of coparenting across intact and separated coparenting configurations (Molla Cusí et al., 2020). Furthermore, psychological research has lagged behind social changes regarding intact and separated sexually and gender diverse coparents (Johnson et al., 2016), and there is not yet a questionnaire assessing coparenting relationships within these various parenting constellations. For example Johnson and O'Connor (2002) found that lesbian couples who were coparenting performed as well or better on measures of family relationship quality and parental attitude variables than heterosexual couple coparenting counterparts. However, further research is needed to consider the implications of coparenting among sexually and gender-diverse parents living in different family structures.

Need for an Integrative, Simple-to-Use Tool

Within most western cultures, parents can be single, married or separated; sexually and gender diverse; an adoptive or step-parent; and are influenced by multicultural influences on how their parenting promotes children's emotional development and well-being. Despite the various coparenting measures that have been developed for specific research purposes or populations (married, separated, never married), none exist as a tool widely applicable across family structures and free of gender-role assumptions for researchers as well as agencies and programs to use. In this context, we aimed to design a tool that could be accessible, cost-free and could capture the most important underlying factors of the complex construct of coparenting. To move away from siloed assessment tools, we aimed to develop an instrument that could be valid with families in which the parents live together and those that live separated, for whatever reason and in any configuration. We also wanted to recognize that couples move between these structures over time. Additionally,

we aim to be more inclusive than previous research has tested for in terms of sexually and gender-diverse families.

Development of CoPAFS

The Coparenting Across Family Structures (CoPAFS) is still in a development phase, as we are finding it to be reliable and valid, but still have much work to do on validating it across diverse samples. To date, we have collected and analyzed two samples and are in the process of analyzing a larger, more diverse group of parents. The first sample consisted of 252 parents. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being a parent with a child under the age of 18 at the time of completing the survey; (2) being a parent who shares parenting in some capacity with at least one other parent; and (3) being a parent who is able to read English in order to provide informed consent and complete the survey.

We began with a review of the literature and an analysis of coparenting measures, resulting in a 56-item Coparenting Across Family Structures Scale (CoPAFS) (Saini et al., 2019). The scale captured nine dimensions of coparenting identified in the literature: (1) Communication; (2) Sharing; (3) Anger; (4) Restrictive coparenting; (5) Facilitative coparenting; (6) Respect; (7) Trust; (8) Conflict; and (9) Valuing the involvement of the other coparent. Parents broadly recruited online from organizations identified as interested in parenting intervention were asked to complete the online coparenting survey on SurveyMonkey. For each of the scale's 56 items, respondents were asked to rate their agreement (ranging from 1—strongly agree—to 5—strongly disagree) with a statement concerning their coparenting relationship. Examples of the items in the scale are: “I usually just give in to the other parent so we do not argue”; “We can usually find solutions about parenting that we are both happy with”; “I get annoyed easily about the mistakes that the other parent makes with our child”; “The other parent undercuts my decisions”; “We have similar hopes and dreams for our child”; “We generally agree on how to discipline our child”; or “Although we don't always agree, we respect each other's differences as parents.”

This pilot test assessed the psychometric properties (stability, reliability, and internal consistency) of the CoPAFS to determine whether the measure could be useful for evaluating the core dimensions of coparenting. The initial pilot and validation study of the 56-item CoPAFS scale demonstrated the scale's reliability and overall strong psychometric properties (Saini et al., 2019). However, in spite of our efforts to recruit a diverse sample, the majority of the participants self-identified as female (81.7%), Caucasian (71.8%), highly educated (64.3% completed schooling beyond college), employed full-time (70.2%), and reported annual incomes over \$80,000 (73%). There was diversity in living status – married, separated, or never together. Over half of the participants were living together with the other parent, either married or in a common-law relationship, a third identified as separated or divorced, and the rest reported living together but neither married nor in a common-law relationship.

Next, we added a second sample of 329 parents and conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. These analyses reduced the 56-item CoPAFS scale to a 5-component scale of 27 items

which included Respect, Trust, Valuing the other parent, Communication, and Hostility. This short form (27 items) again used items measured by a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree via 3 = Neutral to 5 = Strongly Agree. Examples of items include: “It is important that my child loves both parents”; “I value the other parent’s parenting skills”; “I work well with the other parent when decisions need to be made about our child”; and “I find it difficult to support the other parent’s relationship with our child.”

The second sample was recruited through an invitation to answer an online survey on coparenting and COVID-19 related stressors, which was circulated in multiple online parenting groups on Facebook. The inclusion criteria for participation in the survey were the same as the first sample. Participants were not compensated for participating in the survey. The final sample consisted of 329 participants. The sample again was predominantly mothers (82.1%), overwhelmingly White (81.8%), with far fewer parents identifying as black (4.3%), Latinx (6.1%), Asian (3.3%), or indigenous/Native Americans (1.8%). More than half of the parents (54.4%) had a university degree or above, 29.2% had some post-secondary education and 11.5% had a high school diploma or less. The sample was significantly lower income than the first sample, with nearly half the sample reporting lower average incomes (<\$59,000). A majority of parents (60%) were separated, with proportions of parents never married/living together and/or married/cohabiting.

These limitations notwithstanding, the results of this study provide promising evidence for the strong psychometric properties of the short-form 27-item CoPAFS scale for this homogeneous sample. The short-form scale was very strongly correlated with the 56-item CoPAFS scale (Pearson correlation = 0.98), as were the intercorrelations between the 5 subconstructs—which were all significant and ranged between 0.763 and 0.914. The internal consistency of the short-form scale was excellent (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.96). The confirmatory factor analysis for the 27-item CoPAFS scale measurement model showed good model fit indices, and all estimates for the five subconstructs were significant, ranged between 0.82 and 0.96, and explained between 67% and 92% of the variation on the short form scale. In the transition from a 9-subconstruct model to a 5-subconstruct model, Anger and Conflict were found to be better conceptualized from a practice perspective as a single factor—Hostility.

Consistent with family systems theory, the five dimensions of the short form CoPAFS foreground the conditions that foster autonomous, considerate, and coordinated parenting by coparents. The pivotal roles of trust and respect are especially supported by family systems considerations, given that these two dimensions constitute the conditions of possibility for accepting and supporting each coparent relationship with each child.

Translated into Six Languages

As we continue to collect data, the CoPAFS was translated into five additional languages: Mandarin, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Hebrew. An Italian version also is being used autonomously. For each language version, the survey was translated alongside colleagues we identified whose primary language was the one being translated. Typically, the colleagues included clinicians and/or academics in a country that spoke the language of interest, such that North

America was not the major collection point across languages. Based on local expert feedback, we made edits in the surveys to be consistent with the meanings attributed to the items in the culture being studied. For example, questions about sexual orientation, the meaning of sharing childrearing, and family structure (living together or apart) held different valances in different cultures. The survey is being collected not only in different languages but in different countries, expanding the cultural differences we can examine.

To date, we have collected another several hundred English surveys, and over 900 Mandarin surveys – almost all of which are a married sample from parents living in China. About 600 of those surveys are being analyzed by Smith College student Tianmei Zhu, comparing English and Mandarin-speaking speaking samples, for mothers and fathers, to learn more about coparenting in two different cultural frames.

We are also making efforts to collect more data from fathers, in particular, from various ethnic and racial groups, and at diverse economic and education levels.

Ways CoPAFS Can Be Used in Practice

In the meantime, colleagues have used CoPAFS on their own or through parenting education or intervention programs underway. The tool is free-of-charge, accessible, and quick. That makes it easy to obtain and use. Although there are not yet normed data from which to interpret or categorize, the tool can be used qualitatively and interpretively. Moreover, you can compare individually collected data to information collected by the researchers on a larger scale if the individual/group demographics are similar to those currently available. Such comparisons must be made with care and great conservatism, but they can provide some generic information. Here are some ways the tool is being used.

- **Collect the tool with couples or parents who are clients in clinical practice to assess the extent to which coparenting is operating as a positive aspect of their lives**, as well as to identify the specific subconstructs in need of attention. The tool is used to understand how similarly or differently the parents assess their coparenting and which factors are least correlated or most in agreement to identify strengths and areas for focus.

- **Have parents talk specifically about the meaning of the five factors in their life as coparents**: Where are they a strong team? What do they need to work on? How do they see their progress or lack of it affecting their children?

- **Increasing trust and respect between parents.** Without trust and respect, it is difficult to enhance communication, cooperation, or reduce hostility. Where are the “sore points” in this regard that hamper intervention focused more behaviorally? Families who struggle with issues of trust may benefit from a different approach than families whose main challenge is with issues of communication. We believe that laying this groundwork in assessment and other forms of clinical intervention, including couples therapy, support groups, etc., may provide the basis for more productive work.

- **CoPAFS can provide information about coparenting that can be integrated into court -interventions.** It can be used to identify court-involved families at risk of conflict escalation.

- **The CoPAFS is being used to examine which aspects of coparenting are changing as a result of parenting education.** Such information can inform the development of better parenting classes or interventions.

- **Correlations between child outcome information and CoPAFS factors may offer clues about which components of coparenting can create significant change, and in which circumstances.**

Give It a Try!

With coparenting heralded as an important component of parenting and reduced stress (e.g., in response to COVID) (Pruett et al., 2019), developing better and more universal assessment tools is a priority in family research. Join our team of data collectors. Attached is a flyer with a link to the survey in different languages. Use it through research, couples and family work, student projects, or for your own interest. We look forward to working with anyone who wants to help us collect more diverse data – especially relevant to education and income levels, gender inclusion, race, etc. The development of this tool will be ongoing for some time to come; we will continue to improve upon the tool and share uses for it in clinical work and study.



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CO-PARENTING SURVEY INVITATION



The survey is available in 6 languages:

Arabic: bit.ly/copafsArabic

English: bit.ly/copafs27

French: bit.ly/copafsFrench

Hebrew: bit.ly/copafsHebrew

Mandarin: bit.ly/copafsMandarin

Spanish: bit.ly/copafsSpanish

About The Survey

We are a team of researchers involved in supporting parents' involvement in the raising of their children.

Complete an online survey, 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked questions about co-parenting and some basic informational questions.

Your information is completely anonymous.

Please Participate If:

- 01 You are a parent of a child under 18 years old
- 02 You are married, divorced, separated, or never lived with the other parent
- 03 You are both involved with your child

For questions, please contact one of the researchers:

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This research has been approved by the Smith College Institutional Review Board.
Thank you for your participation.

Relevant Articles to CoPAFS:

- Pruett, M.K., Alschech, J., Saini, M. & Feldscher, T. (2021). The impact of coparenting on mothers' COVID-19 related stressors. *Social Science*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/10/8/311/pdf>
- Saini, M., Pruett, M.K., Alschech, J. & Sushchuk, A. (2019). A pilot study to assess coparenting across family structures (CoPAFS). *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(5), 1392-1401.
- Saini, M., Pruett, M.K., & Alschech, J. (*in press*). The short-form of the Coparenting Across Family Structures scale (CoPAFS-27): A confirmatory factor analysis. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

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